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Max Frankel
The New York Times
1920 L Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Frankel:

Thank you for your response to my inquiry about the continuity of presidential policy in Vietnam. A year ago, an able specialist on Vietnam policy who had been in government service both in Vietnam and at the Paris peace negotiations, expressed basically the same views as those you have expressed. At my request, he went over with me the evidence he had collected and that which I had brought together. In conclusion, he granted that he had been wrong, misinformed - and he changed his views. This was so able and well informed a person, that I took this incident to be a good measure of the misinformation of the educated American public.

In the absence of more precise information, there is ample reason for your conclusion that the policies of President Kennedy were in continuity with the previous and later policies. He concealed information from the public and he shared responsibility for the tragedy and mismanagement of the Vietnam affair. But that is not the whole picture, and the rest of it is not just guessing or speculation. The other side of the question has not been adequately studied by the American public precisely because subsequent administrations have not wanted it known. It has been in their interest to have it appear that they were only following a consistent, pre-established pattern. As one irrefutable confirmation of this, I point out the Galbraith Report on Vietnam which President Kennedy had commissioned and which President Johnson would not allow to become public.

President Kennedy, like other presidents, was undergoing rapid change and development in his thinking and policy during his term as president. The presidency is an educational experience far beyond most, and it was actively transforming many of Kennedy's views. His growing recognition of the role and policies of the C.I.A. in Cuba and in Vietnam were among his areas of disillusionment. Richard Starnes reported in his column in 1963 that he had recently visited the Far East and had spoken with one of the top American officials there. This official (presumably a Kennedy appointment) was "of high rank and immense personal prestige." He told Starnes: "I have Q security clearance, which is the highest anyone can have and I thought I knew pretty much what was going on, but I've been appalled by what I've seen here. I seriously question

whether President Kennedy himself has any effective control over this monstrous bureaucracy."

Kennedy had started green, but was learning fast. He had to face the alternatives of either escalation of American military involvement in Vietnam, or of getting out. In the last few months of his life, Kennedy was moving to the view that the United States should not repeat the kind of military involvement that occurred in Korea. Douglas MacArthur's warning against such involvement had deeply impressed him and Kennedy was not in the camp of men like Johnson and Nixon who thought that the war should be ended simply by wading in with American troops and getting a military victory.

You, and most of the media (in contrast to men like Senator Fulbright) have assumed that Kennedy would have drifted into military involvement just as Johnson did. Roger Hilsman asserts the contrary. As Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Hilsman was in a fairly good position to know. He says in his book, To Move a Nation, that President Kennedy "made it abundantly clear to me on more than one occasion that what he most wanted to avoid was turning Vietnam into an American war. He was sceptical of a policy of escalation, and of the effectiveness of an air attack on North Vietnam." Kennedy made this view public as well: "We can help them; we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisors; but they have to win it. . . ." In contrast to this, the evidence is rather conclusive that both before his presidency and during "it seemed clear that President Johnson's natural instinct was toward attempting a military solution. . . although hedging it with political qualifications." (Hilsman)

We see the same contrast between the policy Kennedy was working towards in Cuba and Johnson's dealings with the Dominican Republic. Kennedy's early Cuban policy was not significantly different from previous and later administrations. At the time of his death, however, he had two unofficial envoys communicating with Castro exploring rapprochement. The response was significant. Castro said that Kennedy "has the possibility of becoming. . . the leader who may at last understand that there can be coexistence between capitalists and socialists, even in the Americas. . . . I know, for example, that for Krushchev, Kennedy is a man you can talk with. I have gotten this impression from all my conversations with Krushchev. Other leaders have assured me that to attain this goal, we must first await his re-election. Personally, I consider him responsible for everything (that is, the stress that led to the missile crisis and the embargo), but I will say this: he has come to understand many things over the past few months; and then too, in the last analysis, I'm convinced that anyone else would be worse. . . . If you see him again, you can tell him that I'm willing to declare Goldwater my friend if that will guarantee Kennedy's re-election!" (Jean Daniel in "The New Republic", December 7, 1963)

That is but one of many positive evidences of the shift that was taking place in Kennedy's thinking and planning at the time of his assassination. Another piece of evidence is

Senator Morse's statement in April, 1966. He said that he had visited President Kennedy about ten days before the assassination and that when he began to criticize the American rôle in Vietnam, Kennedy had said that he "wasn't sure but what I (Morse) was right " and that Kennedy had that Vietnam situation under "intensive study". When Morse expressed concern that the military would eventually advise sending U.S. troops outright, Kennedy "indicated that was not his intention."

To confirm the reality of Kennedy's determination to deescalate the Vietnam war there is the fact that he announced the withdrawal of a thousand troops on November 15th before the assassination. Marquis Child in "The Progressive" (1966) said that "in the last year of his life, Kennedy had made a start. He had begun to chart the bold new course that was visible in his most heroic utterance, the commencement address at American University."

We need to avoid wishful thinking and illusion as well as tendencies towards hero worship. But I feel that the current assertions that Kennedy would have been led into the same Vietnam policies as Johnson's and Nixon's are unjustified.

In your letter you said: "the Kennedy advisors carried that continuity fervantly into the Johnson years." This makes no allowance for the change in Kennedy or for the fact that at least some of his advisors (Hilsman, for example) did not think there was this continuity and they did not fervantly follow Johnson's management. MacNamara and a number of others were indeed fervant and stayed in line with the earlier policy which Kennedy had begun to become disillusioned with. It seems to me, though, that you do not take into account the change in Kennedy's policies and perceptions which had not yet had a chance to be implemented and thus, publicly recognized.

Thank you again for your response.

Sincerely,

Griscom Morgan

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GM:ej

cc: Senator Fulbright

✓ I.F. Stone

"The Progressive"